

Sketch

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Night Bus

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Abstract

YOU don't mind, do you?" He gestured with the bottle in his hand. "No, not at all."

Night Bus

by Peggy Weber

English, Junior

YOU don't mind, do you?" He gestured with the bottle in his hand.

"No, not at all."

He unscrewed the black cap and tipped the bottle up to his lips, took a swig—a long one—his lips puckered over the top in a long kiss. When he took his mouth away, his tongue lingered on the glass ridges; but when he leaned back into his seat, his tongue flowed back between his lips.

The girl sitting next to him was somewhat amused, but did not show it—rather, her face and posture were as revealing as the long mirror at the front of the bus and above the driver; the mirror reflected the ordinary, beige seats pressed with bodies, and nothing more. She practiced that art strangers and bus riders know so well, the art of breathing spontaneous facial expression in through the nose before it surfaces. Sometimes the damp nasal passages stifled the unexpressed moment and it died; at other times, it grew into quiet reflection.

Before she could consider her partner, however, he turned his body toward her, and through wet lips and knots of white teeth, whispered, "I needed that." She smiled. Secretly she thought, "Well, jackass, you could have offered me some." It is a way young ladies have of being daring.

His bottle, neither round nor elegant, was without a label, and, in fact, it struck her as some type of medicine bottle, the kind history books picture from the temperance period, the ones with captions implicating little old ladies and cough syrups. He was silent and looked out of the window for long minutes; she surveyed the dark of seats and bodies, bodies which moved up and down, stretched arms,

legs, hands; dreamlike, blending in and out of the dull seats. In a few hours the bus would deflate considerably.

It amused her to think of the aisle as a tube squirting people out of the bus's accordion doors. It also tired her. And she more easily pictured pieces of paper, cigarette butts, a penny, a pencil, a wad of gum, all the confetti of daily interaction. The windows stared in rows alongside the seats, inward it was dark and outward it was dark. The landscape was dark and bitter.

She had taken a taxi from her boarding house to meet the two o'clock night bus. The station wasn't open then and after the taxi left, she had to wait alone. Over by an adjoining building there were some garbage cans, so she sat next to them, waiting, with only a headlight now and then trailing the highway beyond. Finally a car emerged from the road, sprawling light across the station windows, then receded with a groan toward the traffic again. The young couple waited with her until the bus came. Inside, by-passing several pairs of seats with one passenger, and finding nowhere to be alone, she sat down near a fellow at the back of the bus. A few of his buddies came up, congratulated him on his luck, laughing slyly in her direction. Rummaging in her purse she found a cigarette.

When he spoke to her finally, she was deep in her own being, so that some brief effort was required to pull her away from the past and the future. A lulling throb near her forehead was the beginning of a headache, and though he drawled, a slight tension behind his words jerked the hull of her brain inside its hollow—much like a bone against its joint—it drew her attention tight like the spoke of a turning wheel and enabled her to concentrate one spoke of spinning nerve matter on her partner. Politely and distinctly she heard herself say, "My name is Janet. What's yours?"

"Willie Jackson." At first she had been a little suspicious of him; now to talk to someone was a dear relief. She learned he was a butcher—Willie Jackson, the butcher.

"Where do you work?"

"In Chicago."

"Oh really? How long have you been a butcher?"

"About five years."

"I don't—really I don't know much about, you know, that type of work. What do you do exactly?" It was a dry

script, but his brown eyes were wonderful. Because she was curious, because it was a pleasure to seek out the detail of another human life, she watched him intently, the full brown face especially, and tried to fill the lines of his face and words with new specifics. Where did he live precisely? Did he live alone? Why was he on this bus? Would he call someone when he got off? What color was his home? Who were his buddies traveling with him and sitting up farther ahead on the bus? What did he do every day of his life? What bars did he know? What women? Simultaneously she saw him in a number of different places and situations, and as she flew over this imaginary landscape, he talked about meat and how to cut it. When he finished, as if he were run down with all there was to say about that, he took another swig.

"Are you sure you don't mind?" he said.

"No, not at all." A long swallow engulfed him.

"Do you like being a butcher?"

"Yeh, it's okay." It was as if to say, "It really isn't relevant, is it?" It prompted her to turn her inquiries toward Chicago.

"Yeh, course I was raised there. My mother lives there and one of my brothers. Me and some friends went to see my other brother in New York. He's married, yeh, and has coupla kids; three kids, a girl and two boys. Me, I'm not married though. I'm thirty-three."

There was a ritual to their conversation, which made it stop and start like two birds both pecking a piece of corn across the barnyard. He would say something. She would reply. They would assent on that point, then each stare straight ahead, still nodding their heads about that last point. It went on this way. Sometimes she would pick up the conversation, give it a peck or two; then they would look around the yard, maybe back toward the chicken coop; then he would give a peck. When the bus at last stopped it lit up like a menthol tunnel, green against the night; he helped her on with her coat, they were still talking as they left the bus, so it seemed natural to sit with him and his friends inside the cafe. He paid for her coffee. It annoyed her that the bus driver kept looking at them; at the same time it occurred to her that he wasn't really. Still, he had a bovine face, with something in it like the warm drip of milk from

the tits of a cow; the milk swam around the nipples of his eyes. Stupid, slow, he handled his passengers as impersonally as wet cud. Why didn't she like him? Why was she so silly? Why wasn't he lonely?

Outside the coffee house she smelled lilacs somewhere. She might as well have stayed outside and picked some because it took time to collect tickets from the few new passengers, it took time to board luggage. It took time to start. Back on the bus she took the window seat in case she wanted to read and had to turn on the night light. She watched the moths circling outside the coffee house. Had it been an arid year? The moths grew hard and crude in their flappings, awkward. They ceased to fly, trudged the sidewalks, their soft capes thrown back over their withered nerves. Did they trudge in mock-humor directed at all the people of the world, all vagrants, thrown out into the streets of the world—what with their feeler-feet thick against the pavement, almost shod? They no longer did those simple dances that were so much the fashion when each ray of moonlight was not like a sledge. For, thinking back to early summer, it had not seemed the way it seemed now to her. She remembered warm nights, where, out in the owl boughs, bowls of stars would mix and stir and drain into the milk of morning, spilling across the splashing river trout; their backs would flash with star dew; night to morning, morning to night, all continuous, all contingent. Every movement of the season's breathing tangle of air and animals, of rise and fall, was at peace somehow with every other movement. But all contingency, all precision, was lost in summer's exhaust. Sitting now in the bus outside the station, the whelping owls began to fluster and their groans came to sound like trains tooting and converging horribly upon the reason of such gentle, loving order; outside the window, the stars began to crunch, scraping across the dark like glass cicadas. All rhyme stopped, then all rhythm, then all motion. Where was winter? Whoever tacked those sky points in that sky like pinwheels, to tilt and whirl, had whimpered away to another universe, leav-

ing them to rock like trundle beds. And the moths, their abdomens lean, already were turning dull eyes back into the earth again. Willie was unaware of this and complained because the bus hadn't started; and presently it did, and they were back on the highway again.

Very quickly all of her muscles went to sleep and so did she. When she woke, Willie was asleep. When she tried to read, a moth interposed upon the page. Apparently it had boarded at the last stop. Eventually she had to get rid of it; by all standards, this was a rather elaborate undertaking. Pressed between her hands, it quivered hot, then cold, like an ember folding in upon itself. Holding the fragments in one level hand, she closed her eyes, that the light might scatter its rays less coldly; and, indeed, in darkness, the separate rays gathered into discrete throbs of dizzy warmth, as a candle spawning sheets of molting light to strike into the skin and blood. With her free hand, she felt for the head of the moth, which seemed precarious, and it hung a little heavy, rather like a sad gourd, to its smeared vine of abdomen and legs; and just as brittle as if seeded and ripe; so she lopped it off, the head—a useless pebble, it rolled as gently across her wet palm. She rubbed between her forefingers the wings—soft as ashes, cool as salt. She had got it. In celebration, she lit a cigarette, but as she brought it up to her lips to draw, her fingers smelled as green as the swelling lilacs outside the chatter of the cafe lights; though after a while they smelled as cold and gray as the pavement below the bus.

“Heh, can I bum one of those?”

“Sure thing.” She handed Willie the pack; the smoke had awakened him.

“These rides, sure get long. I been riding since—well, over twelve hours.”

“No kidding?”

“Huh, kinda gets to the old backbone.”

“Sure does.” His bottle was gone; he held it empty in his hands as he dozed back to sleep. As she looked at his soft head near touching the slope of his shoulder, she thought,

“What do I know of you?”—and knew it applied both ways, to both of them. What did she know of him? What did she know of herself? What did he know of her? What did he know of himself?

You rode a bus seeking passivity, wanting it; yet, were not passive. It was as much an activity as watching a football game or playing down the gridded field. It was not the same, yet here was a field. You could talk or not talk, but either way, in the languor of a night bus, where the faces were always sad, were always marred, you could perceive, strong as pulse, not the reason for sadness, but rebirth of the universality of it. Like Willie. Her own particular doom or joy, she knew not which Chicago would spare her—was it perhaps nothing to his pain? This did not make hers less; but there were reserves of grief night buses bore, reserves which tore reason’s shank into a torsion, whose spine was the conversion of pure reason into pure feeling.

Janet remembered other passengers she had known but briefly on other nights. There was the “tough,” slick and shrewd. What of the woman whose son had gone to war? She had talked of her grief and left her address in the case that Janet might come to visit her sometime. There was the military man who sat in front of her once, stiff and reserved. And the mothers who came aboard with children—who had no husbands or were traveling to them? What of Willie, poor and sad? So much they did not speak, all of them; or could not, lest their thoughts come as stillborn calves and lose fresh desire. The bus took them all from their stations into its womb; like a wolf it devoured them all in space, perhaps carved their caves and solaces into its enameled walls.

Janet knew not where they came from, where they went; not a single one. Each was significant, each was nothing. The day was coming, the waist of night was slim. Willie’s stomach was warm with liquor and sorrows, though in what proportions it was impossible to know.